



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - public distribution

Date: 11/18/2005

GAIN Report Number: E35221

EU-25

Fishery Products

Eco-Labeling Schemes for Fisheries Products

2005

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Report Highlights:

The EU eco-label award scheme covers 20 industrial groups but does not yet include food products. The European Commission has tabled a "Communication" designed to launch a debate on the eco-labeling of fisheries products. Three possible options are presented in the Commission's Communication.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Brussels USEU [BE2]
[E3]

Eco-labeling Schemes for Fisheries Products

The EU eco-label award scheme covers 20 industrial products groups but does not yet include food products. In June 2005, the European Commission tabled a "Communication" designed to launch a debate on the eco-labeling of fisheries products. This initiative is in response to NGO's and EU consumer groups' growing concern that current food production practices may be damaging the environment. Supermarket chains and trading companies are increasingly interested in food products that are environmentally-friendly. As a result, there is a proliferation of private initiatives, but the reliability of the environmental claims is not always easy to establish. The demand for eco-labeled products remains difficult to quantify. The Communication quotes a recent U.S. study where consumers indicated a preference for eco-labeled products, but the analysis showed that the price took precedence over environmental concerns. In other terms, the success of an eco-labeling scheme would depend, at least in part, on the extra costs relative to the scheme. In addition, consumer interest varies from country to country, depending on market peculiarities and public perception of the concept of sustainability.

The Communication also notes that attention should be given to ongoing discussions in international fora on eco-labeling. Earlier this year, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) adopted international guidelines on eco-labeling, and discussions on these issues and their potential effects on free trade areas are progressing in the World Trade Organization (WTO) Committee on Trade and Environment. The Commission claims to be committed to the integration of the environmental dimension into fisheries, but warns that the introduction of an eco-labeling scheme could lead to new barriers in trade.

The Commission is presenting three possible options in its Communication:

Option 1: Non Action. This option would involve retaining the status-quo, which means that eco-labeling schemes could continue to develop freely without any intervention on the part of the public sector.

Option 2: Creating a single Community eco-labeling scheme for fish and fishery products. Under this scheme, public authorities would be involved at all stages of the development, operation and control of the scheme. A single scheme would avoid confusion created by competing eco-labeling schemes, reassert the prerogatives of public authorities in the management of fisheries resources. However, organizational complexities and the significant public costs could outweigh the arguments in favor.

Option 3: Establishing minimum requirements for voluntary eco-labeling schemes. Under this option, the Commission would specify a set of minimum requirements for voluntary demand-led eco-labeling schemes. Eco-labeling schemes could freely develop through public and/or private initiatives as long as they comply with the minimum requirements. The involvement of public authorities would be limited to the registration of the schemes and the verification of their compliance with the minimum requirements. This approach would provide a "safety net" of conditions designed to avoid the risk of distortion of competition or misinformation, and offer a certain level of guarantees for consumers. Schemes that are already in operation could be more easily integrated.

The Commission currently favors the third option as it would provide enough flexibility and would be proportionate in terms of costs. Representatives of the industry and EU institutions will likely focus on the following key questions in their debate:

- What should an eco-labeling scheme certify: a fishery, a fishing method, or other components? Should therefore single issue labels be considered as an integral part of an eco-labeling policy?
- How can one ensure the approach will be devoid of contradictions whilst simultaneously offering a high degree of voluntarism and feasibility?
- How can one fully use the potential of eco-labeling schemes for the promotion of sustainable fisheries, while yielding real benefits for fishermen, processors and consumers?
- Should the approach be more result oriented or means oriented?

Launching the debate is the first step in the development of an eco-labeling scheme. A timetable outlining further steps has not yet been established, but the Commission plans to come up with a schedule "soon".

References

Commission Communication "Launching a debate on a Community approach towards eco-labeling schemes for fisheries products"

http://europa.eu.int/comm/fisheries/doc_et_publ/factsheets/legal_texts/docscom/en/com_05_275_en.pdf

FAO – Guidelines for the Eco-labeling of fish and fishery products from Marine Capture Fisheries

<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/a0116t/a0116t00.pdf>

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